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Title: Struggling farming co-op to add quality control

Date: 04/25/2005

Source: [Courier-Journal \(Louisville\)](#)

Writer: Associated Press

Lead:

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OWENSBORO, Ky. -- The West Kentucky Growers Cooperative seems to be facing a make-or-break year, and officials are changing some practices in hopes of making it.

The co-op will promote product quality this year, having hired Dave Kendrick as production manager and planning to reject vegetables that don't meet standards, said Joe Cecil, the co-op's chief executive and president of sales.

The move comes after the state Agricultural Development Board questioned the co-op's viability when it asked the board to cover operating losses last year that were blamed on heavy summer storms.

Although some growers have made money, the co-op as a whole has not turned a profit in its five seasons.

Co-op officials said they hope the new position of production manager can help more farmers make a profit.

Kendrick will work with the 39 growers to make sure that they have high-quality sweet corn, bell peppers, squash and broccoli -- most of which are high-maintenance crops that need more attention than traditional row crops such as corn and soybeans.

"We feel very strongly having the production manager is going to boost our yields," Cecil said.

Kendrick said his job is to work with the growers "from seeding and transplanting all the way through harvest." He said growers have accepted the coming changes.

Growers will be charged a fee for Kendrick's services, Cecil said, but that will be refunded if the grower produces more than the average co-op yield during the season.

Because quality is at a premium, each vegetable shipment from growers will be inspected

before it is accepted, Cecil said. Crops that don't meet standards will be sent back to the grower.

In the past, the co-op accepted lower-quality crops, Cecil said, so growers could recoup as much of their production costs as possible. But that practice resulted in lower prices for all co-op vegetables.

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